A TRUE MODE OF UNION:

RECONSIDERING THE CARTESIAN HUMAN BEING

A Thesis

by

AMBER ROSE CARLSON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2012

Major Subject: Philosophy

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Chair of Committee	Stephen H. Daniel
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ABSTRACT

A True Mode of Union: Reconsidering the Cartesian Human Being. (May 2012)

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When considering the nature of the human being, Descartes holds two main claims: he believes that the human being is a genuine unity and he also holds that it is comprised of two distinct substances, mind and body. These claims appear to be at odds with one another; it is not clear how the human being can be simultaneously two things and one thing. The details of Descartes' metaphysics of substance exacerbates this problem. Because of various theological and epistemological commitments, Descartes frames his metaphysics of substance in a way that ensures mind and body's real distinction from one another. Articulated from this perspective, the problem becomes one wherein it is not clear that two completely separate substances can come together to form one entity. The aim of this thesis is to show how Descartes can hold real distinction and true union without contradiction.

To this end, I will first detail the problem and outline a variety of solutions that have already been presented. Then I will outline important concepts relating to Descartes' metaphysics of substance and attributes. This not only reveals the depth of the problem but also lays the groundwork for my proposed solution. I argue that the key

to understanding how these two claims are consistent and in accord with Descartes' philosophy is through a comment Descartes makes to his contemporary Henricus Regius where he urges that the union of mind and body is achieved through a "mode of union." I substantiate this claim by arguing for the intelligibility of understanding union as a modal attribute within Descartes' framework. Finally, I show how Descartes can hold real distinction and true union with consistency. When union is understood as a mode, mind and body are able to exist apart from one another, ensuring real distinction. Moreover, union construed as a mode does not allow the complete separability of mind and body. Thus, when united, mind and body achieve the kind of unity Descartes desires for the human being.

For Andrew Zane Westaby Reinartz

Because

“A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been blessed to find myself in the supportive and challenging atmosphere cultivated by Texas A&M's Philosophy Department. I am indebted to all who make this department a wonderful place to live and work. In particular, I would like to thank Scott Austin and Robert Garcia. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee Robin Smith and Craig Kallendorf for their continued support. I am especially indebted to the chair of my thesis committee, Stephen H. Daniel.

I would also like to thank those who contributed to my philosophical education in its nascent stages: LaMoyne Pederson and Michael Waddell. LaMoyne was the first to introduce me to the early modern philosophers, and Michael has provided more friendship and support for my philosophical education over the years than I can ever repay.

This thesis would also not be possible without the unyielding support of my friends and family. I would like to thank my parents, April and John, for more love and support than I could ever put to paper; Miguel Bencomo for his love, laughter, and patience; Kevin Hernández for a life-long friendship that has only just begun; Ryan Timpte for a cherished friendship and his unshakable faith in me; Kathy Joy for everything that comes with each pot of tea; and, finally, I thank Andrew Reinartz for a friendship so deep I can think aloud, for years of laughter, and for his inexplicable enthusiasm for my work.

NOMENCLATURE

AT	C. Adam and P. Tannery, ed., *Oeuvres de Descartes,* (revised edition, Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964-1976).
CSM I	John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, ed., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
CSM II	John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, ed., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
CSMK	John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny, ed., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. III. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Unity

Descartes is famous for his controversial belief that the human being is comprised of two different substances: thinking substance and corporeal substance. This claim gives rise to notorious problems with mind-body interaction; commentators wonder how a corporeal substance (body) can causally interact with an incorporeal substance (mind or soul). Many commentators are skeptical that interaction is possible at all given Descartes' framework, and those who attempt explanation come to no clear consensus. While questions surrounding mind-body interaction dominate Descartes' metaphysical legacy, it is not the only problem that arises from Descartes' dualistic claim. Indeed, before one worries about the plausibility of interaction, there is good reason to wonder how mind and body are joined to comprise the human being at all. Insofar as mind-body interaction presupposes the unity of the human being, the problem of union takes on special import for those concerned with the human being's nature.

Some commentators, however, deny that the union of mind and body is itself a distinct problem for Descartes, and would thus take issue with the claim that interaction presupposes union. Margaret Wilson, for one, argues for what she calls a "Natural

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This thesis follows the style of *Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition.*

Institution" theory, wherein the union of mind and body just is "[...] the arbitrarily established disposition of this mind to experience certain types of sensations on the occasion of certain changes in this body, and to refer these sensations to (parts of) this body."[1] This view subsumes the problem of union under the problems associated with interaction. Adopting this view, scholars can gloss over union and focus on interaction, since union is nothing more than the causal relationship between mind and body. The problem of union is simultaneously explained by interaction and explained away by it.

Wilson can be contrasted with a number of other commentators who believe that Descartes treats the problems associated with unity and interaction as two separate—albeit related—problems. According to those commentators, Wilson is right to notice that unity and interaction are intimately related concepts, but she errs when she conflates the two. Paul Hoffman agrees with Daisie Radner, who believes that the union of mind and body is metaphysically more fundamental than interaction. While Radner argues that Descartes' treatment of mind-body union functions primarily to explain interaction,[2] Hoffman believes that Descartes' focused attention on mind-body union has a greater purpose. Hoffman believes that mind-body union is meant to explain the human being's nature. Because mind-body union is crucial for understanding the nature of the human

1. Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 219.

2. Daisie Radner, "Descartes' Notion of the Union of Mind and Body," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (1971): 159-170.

being, Hoffman wants to know how two different substances can come together to form one entity, as Descartes' writings suggest.[3]

I will propose that commentators who focus on interaction are remiss when they fail to address the competing claims that catch Hoffman's attention, since Descartes' preoccupation with both claims is apparent throughout his writings. At times Descartes says that the human being is a genuine unity and at others he says that the human being is comprised of the two different substances, mind and body. Reformulated from the perspective of the individual substances, the same problem is often portrayed as a tension between the two claims that mind and body are both really distinct from one another and that they are also substantially united when comprising the human being.[4] Even from a cursory reading of these general statements, it is not obvious that they are compatible with one another in either formulation. At the very least, they are troublesome enough that readers can justly require Descartes to give an account of precisely how the human being is one thing while comprised of two things. Descartes himself is aware of this difficulty; in one letter to Princess Elizabeth, he writes:

> It does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of forming a very distinct conception of both the distinction between the soul and the body and their union;

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3. Paul Hoffman, "The Unity of Descartes's Man," The Philosophical Review, XCV, no. 3 (July 1986): 341.

4. Descartes often switches between subjects of predication throughout his discussion of this topic. At times he speaks to the *human being's* unity, and at other times he discusses *mind and body's* genuine unity. For clarity, it is important to track Descartes' subjects of predication. While almost indistinguishable, it is important to notice that they are two slightly different problems. One cannot understand the human being's unity without a clear notion of how mind and body come together. In order to understand the nature of the human being for Descartes, one must examine the sense in which the human being is one, and the sense in which mind and body are united. In this sense, the latter is in service to the former.

> for to do this it is necessary to conceive them as a single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two things; and this is absurd.[5]

This admission is a powerful one, as it tempts readers to decide that Descartes is inconsistent on this point.

A charitable reader might suggest that the admission of difficulty as seen above is not necessarily condemnatory. Yet the problem is exacerbated when one takes a close look at Descartes' metaphysics of substances. His depiction of the human being as an *ens per se* suggests that the human being is one entity: a genuine unity that is not merely two substances conjoined. That is, the human being's mind and body are not accidentally united to form the human being, but the human being is—in essence—its own entity. The detail of Descartes' conception of substances, however, indicates that it is impossible for mind and body to form this kind of unity. Descartes defines his notion of substance in a way that ensures mind and body's complete separability from one another. Briefly put: each substance has a "principal property," which constitutes its nature and essence. All other attributes refer to this principal property. These attributes correspond to the principal property insofar as each attribute must be consistent with the nature of the principal property (e.g. color is not an attribute of the mind because it is not intelligible for color to apply to a non-extended substance). Because a substance is defined in terms of its characteristics, if one can separate out all the attributes of one substance from the attributes of another, one can be assured that these two substances are really distinct. Descartes believes that mind and body are distinct in precisely this way.

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5. AT III 693; CSMK 227.

When mind and body are rigidly defined through their attributes, it is difficult to see how they could possibly come together to form a unity. Descartes can easily argue for either of these views, but his attempt to hold both of them together seems incoherent. Commentators who believe that union is explained by interaction do not solve this problem through conflation; they merely overlook a major tension in Descartes' metaphysics that must be accounted for. These commentators must yet explain how reducing union to interaction allows the genuine unity that Descartes seeks for the human being and yet maintains the real distinction he also asserts for mind and body. Leaving behind those who deny the problem of unity, it is the aim of this thesis to show how Descartes can hold these two views without contradiction and in a way that is consistent with his larger philosophy.

Proposed Solutions: Denying the Mind-Body Paradox

There are two main ways commentators respond to the conflict between real distinction and true union. Some seek to lessen the force of these claims by denying one or the other tenet, while others honor both claims but seek an interpretation of Descartes' writings to explain away the inconsistency. It will be useful to examine these responses in greater detail.

Of the first option, it is easy to see how the conflict dissipates when one denies either that there is a real distinction between mind and body or that the two form a true union. The merit of this stance is that it highlights the difficulty at hand, but it ultimately

is dissatisfying because it does not indicate which claim should be denied or the reasons for denial. Scholars who choose this route can be further demarcated: (1) some argue that Descartes' philosophy simply does not allow for both claims; (2) others believe that Descartes explicitly makes these claims, but they do not trust that he meant to hold them; and (3) some argue that Descartes is not successful in his attempt to argue for them.

Scholars in the first group are those who take positions like Fred Sommers. In this extreme example, Sommers writes that "a Cartesian person is a non-individual, since it is composed of a mind and a body."[6] Sommers takes Descartes' emphasis on real distinction seriously, and so fails to give credence to any claims Descartes makes about unity. In this case, taking seriously Descartes' real distinction simply means that one cannot honestly believe that the human being is an individual or, thus, a genuine unity.

Sommers' concern is not without precedent. Descartes' contemporary Antoine Arnauld brings up a similar concern outlined in the *Fourth Set of Objections* wherein he wonders if the real distinction of mind and body proves too much. He writes:

> It seems, moreover, that the argument proves too much, and takes us back to the Platonic view (which M. Descartes nonetheless rejects) that nothing corporeal belongs to our essence, so that man is merely a rational soul and the body merely a vehicle for the soul – a view which gives rise to the definition of a man as 'a soul which makes use of the body'.[7]

Arnauld worries that Descartes' claim that mind can be known before and independently of body results in a mind-body relationship that is in line with the Platonic tradition.

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6. Fred Sommers, "Dualism in Descartes: The Logical Ground," in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretative Essays*. ed. Michael Hooker (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1978), 223-233.

7. AT VII 203; CSM II 143.

Here the body would be a vehicle for the mind, which raises questions about the extent to which the human being is really a true unity of mind and body. Contrary to this Platonic view, Descartes asserts a unity of mind and body that is closer to an Aristotelian hylomorphism—and indeed many commentators ascribe a kind of hylomorphic interpretation to Descartes. Arnauld can be grouped in with contemporary interpreters like Sommers because he too wonders if real distinction proves too much in the sense that substantial unity is simply impossible.

Sommers and Arnauld seem to be justified in their emphasis on the real distinction of mind and body. For as Descartes admits to Elizabeth, he spends more time discussing real distinction than true union:

> There are two facts about the human soul on which depend all the knowledge we can have of its nature. The first is that it thinks, the second is that, being united to the body, it can act and be acted upon along with it. About the second I have said hardly anything; I have tried only to make the first well understood. For my principal aim was to prove the distinction between soul and body, and to this end only the first was useful, and the second might have been harmful.[8]

Sommers picks up on the fact that Descartes focuses on the real distinction. But in emphasizing distinction, Descartes does not mean to deny union. Nonetheless, as he admits to Henricus Regius, if he is trying to explain real distinction, he knows that it would be difficult if he were to teach true union at the same time:

> many more people make the mistake of thinking that the soul is not really distinct from the body than make the mistake of admitting their distinction and denying their substantial union, and in order to refute those who believe souls to be mortal

8. AT III, 664; CSMK 217-218.

> it is more important to teach the distinctness of parts in a human being than to teach their union.[9]

No doubt, Descartes admits, there is a disparity between his treatment of real distinction and true union, but he explains that this is a calculated decision based on pedagogical concerns, not an effort to deny true union.

Furthermore, Descartes explicitly avers that the human being is an *ens per se* in a number of places, including his letters to Regius, an advocate of Descartes' views who was widely known to be in correspondence with him. When Regius publicly suggested that the body was only accidentally united, i.e. an *ens per accidens*, he was confronted by his opponents. Since Regius promulgated Descartes' views, Descartes was drawn into the debate. In January 1642 Descartes writes to Regius in an effort to correct him. In response to Regius' erroneous public announcements, Descartes writes:

> And whenever the occasion arises, in public and in private, you should give out that you believe that a human being is a true *ens per se, and not an ens per accidens*, and that the mind is united in a real and substantial manner to the body.[10]

Almost directly in conflict with Sommers' view, Descartes tells Regius that the human being is, in fact, a genuine unity, as opposed to an accidental unity of mind and body. So while it is true that Descartes spends more of his time outlining the distinction (thus creating the difficulty with holding both views), he explicitly states that the human being is an *ens per se*. As long as one takes seriously this explicit urging that the human being

9. AT III, 508; CSMK 209.

10. AT III, 493; CSMK 206.

is a true unity, any interpretation that denies Descartes' commitment to true unity falls short.

Not everyone takes Descartes' claims seriously, however, and this brings us to the second group outlined above: those who deny claims because they do not trust that Descartes really means what he writes. There is much debate concerning the sincerity of the claims Descartes makes in his letters, and this is especially true of his letters to Regius since they were comments made in order to appease opponents. Skepticism is largely due to the known theological and political climate in Descartes' time; it is well known that publicly breaking from church doctrine could have very dangerous consequences. Because of the political threats involved, comments that are in accord with church doctrine are often questioned by scholars.

Descartes' claim for real distinction and his claim for true union are both called into question on these grounds, as both are driven by theological tenets. If Descartes were to have been perceived as speaking against the true unity of the human being, he would be severely breaking with church doctrine. Indeed this is the very idea that he emphasizes in his corrective letters to Regius. Similarly, he believes that in order to argue for the immortality of the soul, the real distinction of mind and body must be possible. If mind and body were not really distinct, then the loss of the body would necessarily entail the loss of the soul. Descartes admits the theological implications of real distinction in the synopsis of the *Meditations*, where he asserts that “the annihilation

of the mind does not follow from the decaying of the body."[11] In order for this claim to hold, Descartes must show that mind and body are not the same substance.

The skepticism that grips scholars as a result of these claims is difficult to overcome. I argue that it is best to take Descartes' words at face value, at least initially. If there are other compelling reasons to deny real distinction or true union, then an argument can be made to drop these claims. But since both claims are made on theological grounds, it is difficult to argue for the denial of just one claim—and, curiously, commentators typically use this argument from skepticism to deny one claim in order to grant priority to the other. Since this argument could be used for either claim, it seems that the denial of one on the grounds that it is theologically motivated is itself suspicious. So, even while the political climate was one in which it would be difficult for Descartes to dissent, it is not easy to prove that he did not, in fact, believe what he wrote. Just as it is difficult to prove that he sincerely meant what he wrote, it is similarly difficult to prove that he was insincere. Scholars who dismiss the need to reconcile real distinction and true union based on suspicions of insincerity latch on to a convenient but ultimately indefensible position. It is helpful to be aware of the potential ways that Descartes might be influenced by the political climate, but we should not stop there when his positions become difficult to reconcile.

Scholars in the third group believe that Descartes meant to hold both views, but that he fails at arguing for them.[12] If he fails to adequately explain true union or real

11. AT VII 13; CSM II 10.

distinction, the concern for this problem is diminished. In the event of such failures, scholars have a particular problem to overcome when reading Descartes, but this does not resolve the conflict at hand. Regardless of Descartes' success or failure in arguing for these claims, insofar as his explicit statements are taken seriously, the tension must be accounted for. At the very least Descartes seems to hold these views, and so there appears to be a major inconsistency. Figuring out just why Descartes attempted to hold these views can be valuable for understanding his philosophy overall.

So far I have outlined a variety of ways scholars engage the tension between real distinction and true union of mind and body. Some circumvent the problem altogether by suggesting that union is nothing more than interaction. This view is untenable because of the textual evidence where Descartes treats union and interaction as two separate concepts. Others seek to ease the tension by denying or lessening the force of these claims. Of these scholars, some argue that Descartes should not be interpreted as even stating both views, others deny that Descartes truly believed the views he was outwardly supporting, while others suggest that Descartes is simply not successful in his attempts to hold them.

An additional approach comes from those who honor Descartes' claims and attempt to show how they are internally consistent with Descartes' philosophy. Paul Hoffman, for example, proposes a promising solution that combines a hylomorphic interpretation of unity with a view in which the human being is considered a third kind

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12. Hoffman, "Unity of Descartes's Man," 341. Here Hoffman cites commentator Étienne Gilson as one who denies Descartes' success in arguing for true union.

of substance. But such an interpretation has far-reaching consequences that are difficult to reconcile with traditional readings of Cartesian metaphysics. If true, one wonders why Descartes did not explicitly extrapolate them.

Hoffman takes Descartes' claims at face value, though he recognizes the difficulty in doing so.[13] Despite the difficulty of discerning which, if any, of his writings expresses Descartes' true beliefs, Hoffman proposes a way in which the competing claims for true union and real distinction can be consistent. First, he argues that in a hylomorphic explanation of unity, mind inheres in body as form inheres in matter.[14] This interpretation is accepted by many who place Descartes within the Aristotelian scholastic tradition, as opposed to reading Descartes with a Platonic view wherein the human being consists of a pure mind merely accidentally united to the body. [15] Justin Skirry also argues for a hylomorphic interpretation. He argues that Descartes' notion of unity is quite similar to Ockham's understanding of unity.[16] Putting Descartes in line within the scholastic tradition is compelling because Descartes uses form-matter language in a number of places when referring to the mind and the body.[17]

Some take issue with the hylomorphic interpretation on the grounds that

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13. Ibid., 345.

14. Ibid., 349 ff.

15. For example: Lily Alanen, "Reconsidering Descartes's Notion of the Mind-Body Union," *Synthese* 106 (1996): 3-20.

16. Justin Skirry, "A Hylomorphic Interpretation of Descartes's Theory of Mind-Body Union," *Person, Soul, and Immortality* 75 (2001): 267-283.

17. AT VII 356; CSM II 246/ AT III 503, 505; CSMK 207-208/ and AT IV 346; CSMK 279.

Descartes very clearly abhorred much of the Aristotelian tradition, and explicitly distanced himself from it. Marleen Rozemond argues against Hoffman on a textual basis as well.[18] Rozemond notices that while Descartes does use language which suggests that the mind is the form of the body, he never does so to explain mind-body union, though presumably he had ample opportunity to do so.[19] It is curious that Descartes never explicitly adopts a hylomorphic interpretation of the unity of the human being in any of his correspondence with Regius or Princess Elizabeth. If hylomorphism is how Descartes understood this unity, and if Descartes makes use of hylomorphism in various places, then one can rightly wonder why he carefully abstains from positing hylomorphism as a solution when in correspondence with Regius and Princess Elizabeth.

Another popular way some commentators try to explain true union and real distinction is by construing the human being as a third type of substance. In addition to his hylomorphic interpretation, Hoffman champions this trialist view. He does not deny that mind and body are really distinct, but he reinterprets Descartes' *ens per se* as an indication that Descartes meant the human being to be a third substance. Hoffman carefully considers the possible difficulties with a trialist reading, and proposes solutions to various problems in order to make trialism a viable interpretation.[20] Most notably,

18. Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 139 ff.

19. Ibid., 152.

20. Paul Hoffman, "Cartesian Composites," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (April 1999): 251-270.

Hoffman considers the idea that each substance has a principal property that constitutes the nature of a substance, and he argues that Descartes' metaphysics does not disallow the possibility that a substance has more than one principal property.[21]

The extent to which Hoffman is successful is up for debate, but commentators are uncomfortable with this radical reinterpretation of Cartesian metaphysics. Scholars are hesitant to assent to trialism, in part because it is not in line with traditional Cartesian dualism. As with the hylomorphic interpretation, opponents cite the curious lacuna in Descartes' writings; if Descartes meant for the human being to be a third substance, it is odd that he never explicitly describes it as such. Rozemond acknowledges passages where a trialist reading can be indirectly supported, but she believes that these passages are too vague to be definitive and ultimately denies that Descartes meant the human being as a third substance.[22] Dan Kaufman is another commentator who denies Hoffman's trialist reading. He disagrees with Hoffman on the grounds that in virtue of mind and body's different natures, they can enjoy—at best—a unity of composition, and this type of unity is not a kind required for labeling the human being a third substance.[23]

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21. Ibid.

22. Rozemond, *Descartes's* Dualism, 165 ff.

23. Dan Kaufman, "Descartes on Composites, Incomplete substances, and Kinds of Unity," *Archiv für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 90 (2008): 39-73. For another commentator who denies trialism see Eugenio E. Zaldivar, "Descartes Theory of Substance: Why He Was Not a Trialist," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2011): 395–418.

A New Proposal

It is easy to see how there is no clear consensus regarding the best approach to this problem. Some deny the problem altogether, while others find various ways to lessen the force of the tension, usually by denying a claim for one reason or another. Yet others attempt to reconcile these views with one another by appealing to solutions that result in commitments that are far afield from traditionally accepted Cartesian views. My thesis will suggest an alternate way to explain how Descartes can maintain doctrines of real distinction and true union without contradiction.

To this end, Chapter Two will outline the details of Cartesian substances. In particular it will examine Cartesian substances and attributes while noting their implications for real distinction and true union. This will not only reveal the depths of the problem at hand, but will also lay the groundwork for later chapters. Chapter Three will explore the possibility that union is best understood as a mode of union. Drawing heavily upon the definitions and distinctions made in Chapter Two, this chapter will investigate the role of modes and their relation to substances in an effort to show how mind and body can be really distinct when union is understood as a mode. I argue that Descartes' ability to hold real distinction hinges upon his ability to understand union as a mode and so the bulk of this chapter will argue for the intelligibility of calling union a mode. Chapter Four will then take up the implications of this interpretation. Recalling that the aim of this thesis is to show how Descartes can hold real distinction and true

union simultaneously, this chapter will consider the possibility of maintaining real distinction amidst union, and conversely union amidst real distinction. Finally, Chapter Five will conclude by addressing potential concerns generated by my proposed solution.

CHAPTER II

CARTESIAN SUBSTANCES

Meditative Beginnings

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes proceeds through his innovative epistemological method. Beginning by doubting away everything, Descartes realizes that he cannot doubt away his own mind, and so ensures knowledge of his own existence. Later, with the help of God and the surety of God's goodness, Descartes comes to have knowledge of the existence of corporeal substance and the human body. This process made Descartes famous for his ground-breaking (even if problematic) epistemology, and it is in the *Meditations* that readers catch glimpses of his nascent dualism. Because of the way his epistemological method unfolds, Descartes is neatly poised to argue that mind and body are substances completely separate from one another. This real distinction, then, is not only crucial for its theological implications, but also for its epistemological ones. In the *Meditations,* Descartes explains:

> First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgment that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But, nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of body, in so far as

> this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.[24]

Here Descartes argues that the human mind can exist apart from the body. This idea is crucial for any claims about the immortality of the soul. The first line in the argument has to do with one's ability to have "clear and distinct" ideas, and these terms are essential to many of his epistemological (and thus metaphysical) arguments. In the *Principles* Descartes explains what he means by 'clear' and 'distinct':

> I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.[25]

A perception is clear when it is accessible to the mind, and it is distinct if it is separated from all other perceptions. Pain is an example of a perception that it clear, but not distinct.[26] If one has a clear and distinct idea of something, one can trust in this perception due to the goodness of God. In addition to his comments in the passage above, Descartes avers:

> It is certain, however, that we will never mistake the false for the true provided we give our assent only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive. I say that this is certain, because God is not a deceiver, and so the faculty of perception which he has given us cannot incline to falsehood;[27]

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24. AT VII 78; CSM II 54.

25. AT VIIIA 23; CSM I 207-208.

26. AT VIIIA 22; CSM II 208.

27. AT VIIIA 23; CSM I 207.

Because God is good, we can trust that there is correspondence between our clear and distinct perceptions and their truth. Here Descartes is explaining clarity and distinctness in terms of perception, but the explanation carries over to clear and distinct ideas as well:

> For when we come to know God, we are certain that he can bring about anything of which we have a distinct understanding. For example, even though we may not yet know for certain that any extended or corporeal substance exists in reality, the mere fact that we have an idea of such a substance enables us to be certain that it is capable of existing.[28]

In addition to our perceptions, then, Descartes also believes that our ability to have a clear and distinct idea yields a similar result; when one has a clear and distinct idea, one can be assured of its possible existence.

Taking this idea further into the realm of substances, Descartes argues that because of his epistemological method wherein he can know that he exists as a thinking thing without any surety of his body, mind and body must be different entities. Even though the mind is very closely joined to the body, his epistemological path shows that one can know mind clearly and distinctly before having knowledge of body. Later it becomes obvious to Descartes that one has a distinct and clear notion of the body insofar as it is an extended thing and not a thinking thing.

Again in the *Meditations* Descartes continues to explain the repercussions of clarity and distinctness for the substances mind and body:

> Besides this, I find in myself faculties for certain special modes of thinking, namely imagination and sensory perception. Now I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole without these faculties; but I cannot, conversely, understand these faculties without me, that is, without an intellectual substance to inhere in. This is because there is an intellectual act included in their essential

28. AT VIIIA 28; CSM I 213.

> definition; and hence I perceive that the distinction between them and myself corresponds to the distinction between the modes of a thing and the thing itself. Of course I also recognize that there are certain other faculties (like those of changing position, of taking on various shapes, and so on) which, like sensory perception and imagination, cannot be understood apart from some substance for them to inhere in, and hence cannot exist without it. But it is clear that these other faculties, if they exist, must be in a corporeal or extended substance and not an intellectual one; for the clear and distinct conception of them includes extension, but does not include any intellectual act whatsoever.[29]

Already in the *Meditations* Descartes thus gestures towards the relationship between attributes and substances. He notices that there are certain modes of thinking which he cannot understand apart from the substance in which they inhere. He also notes that he can nonetheless have a distinct understanding of his mind without these particular modes. He makes similar observations about the modes of corporeal substance. Finally, he reflects upon the nature of these modes and uses them to draw a distinction between the substances of mind and body. Because the clear and distinct idea of shape, for example, cannot be understood apart from its inhering in an extended substance, attributes of thinking can be distinguished from attributes of extension.

These two lengthy passages from the *Meditations* are good places to begin an investigation of the nature of substances, since his metaphysics is so clearly informed by his epistemology. In addition to the theological impetus for real distinction, there is also an epistemological drive. Real distinction falls out of Descartes' epistemology because of his careful methodological doubting. Through these observations, Descartes has already begun in the *Meditations* to gesture in the direction of a specific definition of substances wherein attributes play a defining and informative role. But his treatment

29. AT VII 78-79; CSM II 54-55.

here is somewhat vague, and commentators notice his weak conclusion; at the end of his ruminations on real distinction in the *Meditations,* he concludes that mind and body *can be distinct.* Commentators find it odd that he does not conclude that mind and body *are in fact distinct.* This worry will be taken up later, but for now it is enough to notice that Descartes is already deeply invested in the real distinction of mind and body, and that real distinction is intimately tied to a substance's attributes. He outlines these concepts in further detail later in his *Principles.*

Substances and Attributes

In the *Principles*, Descartes defines substance:

> By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend upon no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God.[30]

Descartes' primary definition is one where a substance depends upon nothing else for its existence. Defined in this way, only God is a substance. But Descartes recognizes other substances that do not fit this description. These substances differ insofar as they are created. Because of their created nature, they require divine concurrence in order to exist:

> In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence. Hence the term 'substance' does not apply univocally, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no

30. AT VIIIA 24; CSM I 210.

> distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures.[31]

Other substances depend upon God's concurrence for their continued existence, but this is a very different definition of substance than he initially proposed. The term 'substance' is equivocal in meaning—it does not apply to God and created substance in the same respect. It is the created substance that Descartes is concerned with in his notion of the human being, and so it is created substance that this thesis is concerned with.[32]

Regarding created things, Descartes draws a further distinction between substances and their attributes:

> In the case of created things, some are of such a nature that they cannot exist without other things, while some need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist. We make this distinction by calling the latter 'substances' and the former 'qualities' or 'attributes' of those substances.[33]

Descartes' delineation of substance and attributes echoes the claims he makes in the *Meditations*. Created substances need only divine concurrence to exist, but attributes cannot exist without other things (namely, substances). When one asks 'What is a substance, according to Descartes?' the answer will first note a distinction between God—the substance that depends upon nothing else for its existence—and created substances that depend upon nothing other than God for existence. This answer—while expressing a fundamental definition of substance—does not explain how to discern one

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31. AT VIIIA 24; CSM I 210.

32. Hereafter I will use the term 'substance' to refer exclusively to created substance, unless otherwise noted.

33. AT VIIIA 24; CSM I 210.

created substance from another, and it is created substances that are important in the quest for the nature of the human being.

For Descartes, the nature of a substance is revealed by its attributes. Descartes believes that wherever one encounters an attribute, there must be some kind of substance underlying it, since:

> nothingness possesses no attributes or qualities. It follows that, wherever we find some attributes or qualities, there is necessarily some thing or substance to be found for them to belong to; and the more attributes we discover in the same thing or substance, the clearer is our knowledge of that substance.[34]

Not only does the perception of attributes denote that there is some substance present, but it also allows one to know the nature of a substance. The more one knows of a substance's attributes, the clearer picture one has of the substance. But having a clear picture of a substance is not the result of merely noticing a heap of attributes in the same time and space. In an effort to define a substance more precisely by its attributes, he says that "a substance may indeed be known through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred."[35] Thus the "principal property" can be thought of as the defining property of a substance. Each substance has one property that defines its essence, and any other attribute of that substance refers to the principal property. Of mind and body, Descartes assigns the principal properties extension and thought, respectively: "Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of

34. AT VIIIA 8; CSM I 196.

35. AT VIIIA 25; CSM I 210.

corporeal substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance."[36] Of the created substances mind and body, thinking and extension denote their respective essences. All attributes the mind must refer to thinking while all attributes of body must refer to extension.

When Descartes says that all other attributes refer to a substance's principal property, he means that these attributes must correspond to the principal attribute in intelligible ways. Descartes offers some helpful examples:

> Everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is merely a mode of an extended thing; and similarly, whatever we find in the mind is simply one of the various modes of thinking. For example, shape is unintelligible except in an extended thing; and motion is unintelligible except as motion in an extended space; while imagination, sensation and will are intelligible only in a thinking thing.[37]

The principal property of corporeal substance is extension, and since it does not make sense to think of imagination, for example, as extended, one knows that imagination does not properly belong to corporeal substance. Similarly, it is not intelligible to ascribe color or shape to incorporeal thinking substance.

Descartes uses a number of terms to describe the characteristics of a substance. He reserves the term 'principal property' to denote the defining characteristic of a substance, but he seems to use 'attribute,' 'quality,' and 'mode,' somewhat interchangeably:

By *mode*, as used above, we understand exactly the same as what is elsewhere

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36. AT VIIIA 25; CSM I 210.

37. AT VIIIA 25; CSM I 210-211.

> meant by an *attribute* or *quality*. But we employ the term *mode* when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified; when the modification enables the substance to be designated as a substance of such and such a kind, we use the term *quality*; and finally, when we are simply thinking in a more general way of what is in a substance, we use the term *attribute*.[38]

The meanings of these terms are difficult to tease out. Instead of suggesting that these different terms correspond to different classes of (ontologically) real characters, these distinctions seem to denote mere differences in linguistic function. The first sentence reveals that these distinctions are not rigid. A 'mode' is also an 'attribute' or a 'quality.' He goes on to explain what we mean when we use these different terms. When speaking about characteristics in general, we refer to them as attributes. When desiring additional specificity—i.e. when wanting to distinguish between different substances—we can refer to qualities. Finally, when wanting to highlight the aspect that characters are accidental variations of a substance, we can refer to modes.

All of these are distinguished in kind, however, from 'principal properties.' Borrowing from the Aristotelian tradition, principal properties are those that are essential to the substance. Thinking substance cannot exist without thought, and similarly corporeal substance cannot exist without extension. What Descartes terms attributes, qualities, and modes are different from principal properties insofar as they do not constitute the essence of a substance. Modes are accidental variations. They are expressions of the principal properties, but strictly speaking they are characters that could be different without threatening the existence or nature of the substance. Color is a

38. AT VIIIA 26; CSM I 211.

good example of a mode in extended substance. A chair might be brown or red, but this color is not essential to its essence as an extended, corporeal substance.

When Descartes says that modes are the same as qualities and attributes, there is reason to think that these terms are meant to aid discussion about the characters of a substance rather than posit multiple types of characters. Indeed, it is not easy to imagine a character that is neither a mode of substance nor a principal property. As they are defined, a principal property is the character that defines the essence of a substance, and all other attributes refer to this property. This distinction suggests that there is a difference in kind between principal properties and attributes—a difference wherein principal properties are essential to a substance and other attributes are accidental. The passage above collapses attributes, qualities, and modes together in the important sense that they are all accidental properties, but one can employ the terms 'attribute' and 'quality' for specific clarification purposes; and this has important implications for understanding the relationship between substances and attributes.

As we saw earlier, Descartes admits that attributes are dependent upon substances, in that they are not entities in themselves, but are dependent upon substances for their existence. This phrasing is somewhat misleading. In fact, Descartes is adamant that attributes are not real entities at all. Attributes do not exist in an ontologically real sense:

> I do not suppose there are in nature any *real qualities*, which are attached to substances, like so many little souls to their bodies, and which are separable from them by divine power. Motion, and all the other modifications of substance which are called *qualities*, have no greater reality, in my view, than is commonly

> attributed by philosophers to shape, which they call only a *mode* and not a *real quality*.[39]

That a quality has no ontological independence is consistent with the interpretation that when Descartes distinguishes between attributes, qualities, and modes, he is really distinguishing between ways of using natural language to specify concepts—he is not suggesting that there are multiple, rigidly defined classes of substances that enjoy ontological independence. Attributes, qualities, and modes are expressions of the principal property, which denote the essence of a substance, but are not real entities like substances are, nor are they essential features of a substance.

In sum, created substances have one principal property that constitutes the nature and essence of the substance. All other attributes must refer to this principal property, else they would be unintelligible. Mind and body are defined by thinking and extension, respectively. Thus, all attributes of mind must refer to thinking while all attributes of body must refer to extension. Additionally, it is important to note that attributes are not *ens*; they do not enjoy ontological independence. Indeed, they are defined by their dependence upon the substances in which they inhere. Finally, Descartes draws a distinction in kind between principal properties and other properties of a substance in terms of their essential or accidental relationship to substance. While Descartes uses a variety of terms to more easily discuss the accidental characters of a substance, unless it is the principal property, it is accidental and therefore what Descartes calls 'modal.' The ways Descartes defines substances in terms of its attributes puts him in a good position

39. AT III 648; CSMK 216.

to posit the real distinction of mind and body. Since 'real distinction' is a technical term for Descartes, it is important to examine his precise meaning.

A Few Distinctions

The way Descartes defines substance and its relationship to properties and attributes allows him to ensure the real distinction of mind and body, which is a notion at the heart of a human being's nature. In the *Principles* Descartes differentiates between multiple distinction types. He says that "[...] *distinction* can be taken in three ways: as a *real* distinction, a *modal* distinction, or a *conceptual* distinction."[40] Real distinctions hold only between substances. A modal distinction is one that holds between a mode and the substance in which it inheres or between two modes of the same substance.[41] For example, a modal distinction is the difference between color in an extended substance and the extended substance itself, or it might be the difference between color and shape (two modes) of an extended substance. A conceptual distinction is a distinction between a substance and the attributes that make it intelligible or between the attributes of a substance:

> a *conceptual distinction* is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance.[42]

40. AT VIIIA 28; CSM I 213.

41. AT VIIIA 29; CSM I 213-214.

42. AT VIIIA 30; CSM I 214.

On the surface, it is tempting to think that the difference between a modal distinction and a conceptual distinction is that a modal distinction obtains between modes, while a conceptual distinction obtains between attributes. But we just noticed that the difference between modes and attributes is a difference in language, not a difference in kind. Instead, by differentiating conceptual distinctions from modal ones, Descartes is picking out a peculiar class of attributes: those which, if lacking, a substance is unintelligible. Often this means that the substance would cease to exist without these attributes. Descartes offers the relationship between duration and a substance as an example of a conceptual distinction. It is not intelligible to think about a substance without thinking of it as enduring through time. A substance without duration is a substance that does not exist.

Both modal and conceptual distinctions are different from a real distinction insofar as only a real distinction is applied to the distinction between substances. Real distinction, as noted earlier, is marked by one's ability to have a clear and distinct idea of something. Descartes defines real distinction against modal or conceptual distinction:

> strictly speaking, a *real* distinction exists only between two or more substances; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other.[43]

As noted earlier, in order to have a clear and distinct idea, they must be completely separable in terms of their attributes:

> Thus, we can easily have two clear and distinct notions or ideas, one of created thinking substance, and the other of corporeal substance, provided we are careful

43. AT VIIIA 28; CSM I 213.

to distinguish all the attributes of thought from the attributes of extension.[44]

Since the attributes of a substance *must* refer to their respective principal properties in a way that renders them intelligible, Descartes is confident that one can know that mind and body are really distinct. To demonstrate this, all one must do is separate out all the attributes of one from the attributes of another. Because of the way he has defined substances, it is possible for the human being to know that mind and body are really distinct:

> This is the best way to discover the nature of the mind and the distinction between the mind and the body. For if we, who are supposing that everything which is distinct from us is false, examine what we are, we see very clearly that neither extension nor shape nor local motion, nor anything of this kind which is attributable to a body, belongs to our nature, but that thought alone belongs to it. So our knowledge of our thought is prior to, and more certain than, our knowledge of any corporeal thing; for we have already perceived it, although we are still in doubt about other things.[45]

This passage indicates that it is through the orderly epistemological method put forth in the *Meditations*, that real distinction is discovered. Beginning with doubt, one can doubt away the body, but not the mind. For this to be possible, it must be the case that one *can have* clear and distinct notions of the mind and the body separate from one another. Because this process reveals that nothing corporeal belongs to the nature of the human being, it must be the case that Descartes can have a clear and distinct idea of mind and body. Were his ideas not clear and distinct, he would not have the ability to doubt away corporeal substance. Furthermore, because of the way he defines substances and clear and distinct ideas, it must be the case that all attributes of mind are, in fact, different

44. AT VIIIA 25; CSM I 211.
45. AT VIIIA 7; CSM I 195.

from all the attributes of body. When mind and body share no attributes, they are completely different substances. Descartes thus ensures their real distinction from one another. When considering the nature of the human being, this generates devastating (though, I argue, not ultimately insurmountable) complications.

Problematic Implications

Initially the problem at hand was generally expressed as a question concerning the nature of the human being. Since the human being is an *ens per se*, it is one thing, yet it is comprised of the two things mind and body. The surface level problem concerns how the human being can be simultaneously two things and one thing, and Descartes admits this difficulty. Reframed from another perspective, there is an almost imperceptibly different problem from the standpoint of the substances mind and body. Still in service to the overarching question 'What is the nature of Descartes' human being?' it is not obvious how two things, mind and body, can come together to form one thing. So what *is* the mechanism or explanation for how this union is possible?

By delving into the details of the Cartesian metaphysics of substances, we are able to see the impetus behind the real distinction of mind and body. Not only are theological concerns for the immortality of the soul at stake, but Descartes' epistemology is likewise threatened by the possibility that mind and body are not really distinct. As he notes in the *Principles*, however, recognizing that there is a real distinction between mind and body is central to his epistemology:

> we can also be certain that, if it exists, each and every part of it, as delimited by us in our thought, is really distinct from the other parts of the same substance. Similarly, from the mere fact that each of us understands himself to be a thinking thing and is capable, in thought, of excluding from himself every other substance, whether thinking or extended, it is certain that each of us, regarded in this way, is really distinct from every other thinking substance and from every corporeal substance.[46]

Because his epistemological method follows the orderly progression that is based on his ability to know that his mind is different from his body, if mind and body were not really distinct, Descartes could not progress through his epistemological method. That is, he bases his knowledge of the self and subsequently the world around him on his ability to clearly and distinctly perceive his mind as separate from his body. If he were not able to doubt away the material world, he would not able to discern the existence of his mind as such, and the sure existence of his mind is the foundation for the possibility of all other knowledge. Not only would the immortality of the soul be threatened by his inability to separate mind from body, but he would likewise not be able to distinguish himself from other entities. Indeed, our inability to have really distinct concepts threatens our ability to have knowledge of the world at all.

Descartes, then, is committed to the real distinction of mind and body for a variety of reasons that are fundamental to his overall philosophical project. His need to maintain real distinction is evident in the way he conceives of substances. Because they are defined by their principal properties, and because all other attributes must refer to their principal property, Descartes is able to posit a way for one to know mind and body

46. AT VIIIA 28; CSM I 213.

are really distinct. Again, because of the goodness of God, one is then able to know that mind and body are, in fact, really distinct substances.

This reveals the pervasiveness of the problem for Descartes. Not only is the problem one of attempting to conceive of two things as one thing, but it is also a problem trying to figure out how two substances that are defined by their complete separation from one another could possibly come together. It seems that (1) it might not be possible to conjoin them at all, and (2) that if they were joined, they would lose their essential and distinguishing features. One can rightly wonder how, when joined, mind and body are still the same substances as defined when separated from one another. Given Descartes' framework, joining mind and body would render real distinction impossible, and then it is not obvious that they are mind and body in the same sense as before the union. Given this framework, the critiques of commentators like Sommers and Arnauld seem convincing. Has Descartes gone too far in his real distinction? How is it possible for mind and body to come together to form the human being? Despite the fact that this problem is highlighted precisely because of his explication of substances and attributes, I argue that the key for circumventing these problems lies in understanding the nuances of this very same relationship.

CHAPTER III

A TRUE MODE OF UNION

To briefly state the problem again: the general question at hand concerns the nature of the human being. Descartes believes that the human being is a genuine unity, comprised of two distinct substances, mind and body. In addition to the difficulty conceiving of one thing as two things, a close look at Descartes' metaphysics indicates that it might not be possible for mind and body to be united at all. While Descartes believes that mind and body are united, he rarely discusses the mechanism by which this union is achieved.

The key to solving these difficulties, I argue, lies in a seeming offhand comment to Regius. This comment is one of the few where Descartes explicitly mentions the way in which mind and body are united. In January 1642, in response to Regius' erroneous public announcements concerning mind-body union, Descartes urges:

> You must say that [mind and body] are united not by position or disposition, as you assert in your last paper – for this too is open to objection and, in my opinion, quite untrue – but by a true mode of union (*per verum modum unionis*), as everyone agrees, though nobody explains what this amounts to, and so you need not do so either.[47]

Regius' suggestion that mind and body are united by position or disposition is frequently understood to mean that mind and body are united accidentally. When faced with the tension between mind and body's real distinction and true union, Regius seems to attempt to lessen the force of these claims. Instead of defending the notion that mind and

47. AT III, 493; CSMK 206.

body come together to form a true unity, Regius supposes that a better explanation would be to say that mind and body are perhaps united by position—that is, their unity can be accounted for by their close and intimate proximity to one another. Similarly Regius speculates that union might be the result of the disposition of mind and body to be associated with one another, another accidental kind of unity.

Contrary to the idea that mind and body are united by position or disposition, Descartes says that mind and body are united through a mode of union. In the next chapter I will argue that this is claim is crucial for understanding how Descartes can hold real distinction and true union without contradiction. At present, however, it is important to first address those who might not take this claim seriously and then discuss various problems that emerge since it is not immediately evident that this claim is consistent with his metaphysical framework. The rest of this chapter will outline some problems with extrapolating the idea that union is a mode, and then it will respond to each difficulty in turn.

A Mode of Union

The passage quoted above from Descartes' letter to Regius is one place where commentators can easily question Descartes' sincerity. As noted earlier, commentators are often reluctant to give credence to comments such as this one because of the possibility that it is a stance held merely to appease opponents. Descartes recognizes this as the commonly held position, and so he tells Regius that no explanation is needed, and

his treatment fuels the temptation to write this off as insincere. That is, Descartes' confession that this claim is in accord with the standard view arguably supports the possible reading that he does not mean to hold this view but is merely telling Regius what to say to avoid trouble. Furthermore, Descartes allows Regius to bypass explanation of this claim, so one can be tempted to say that Descartes should be held to this same standard. If Regius and others who hold this view need not explain it, why should Descartes be responsible to provide his own account?

Despite these concerns, there are good reasons to take this passage seriously and to demand explanation from Descartes. First, the political context of this letter legitimizes this passage's consideration. In this letter Descartes is attempting to help Regius avoid trouble with his opponents. Because the purpose is to help Regius espouse the correct view of mind-body union, it is unlikely that Descartes would give Regius advice that would fall prey to the same criticisms. Moreover, it is widely understood that Regius is a proponent of Descartes' views. In correcting Regius, Descartes' is also protecting his own public image. Because Descartes' reputation is also at stake, there is even more reason to think that Descartes would stand behind the claim that mind and body are united through a mode of union.

Even though the political context provides some reasons to take this passage seriously, these considerations alone might not quiet the commentators who think Descartes is merely assuaging his opponents by appealing to a standard view. Indeed, he admits that everyone agrees that this is the correct explanation of mind-body union, and so it should be adopted. Furthermore, because everyone agrees and no one gives an

account of just how this mode of union works, Descartes does not require Regius to give any further explanation, nor might he feel that he himself has to provide an account either.

I believe, however, that the claims here should be taken seriously, and that Descartes should not be allowed to escape explanation. Even though he admits that this is the standard view, there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Descartes is insincere. Perhaps most convincingly, recall that Descartes has his own sophisticated conceptions of substance, attributes, and the relation of modes to substances. Because he is correcting Regius not only to escape further criticism but also to ensure that Regius is not misconstruing his own views, it stands to reason that any claim pertaining to modes must also be in accord with Descartes' other claims about modes, their function, and their relationship to the substances mind and body.

Of course, there is always the possibility that Descartes did not mean to hold this view, but commentators do Descartes (and themselves) a disservice when they reject the one place where he explicitly cites the mechanism by which union is achieved. Scholars might be persuaded to take this claim seriously if its seeming inconsistency could be reconciled with the details of Descartes metaphysics after all. I suggest that, even though a variety of problems emerge by calling union a mode, it is still possible to show how it is in keeping with other aspects of Descartes' philosophy. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to investigating the plausibility of calling union a mode.

Problems and Solutions

The first problem to address is whether union is an attribute or a relation. If it were an attribute, it would be a peculiar one, since it seems to require two entities. It would be an attribute unlike color, for example, which clearly requires only one object. The attribute of union requires two entities for intelligibility, for a substance with the attribute of union is joined to something else. Because of this, commentators suggest that union is a two-place relation where the union is explained simply as mind and body being in a particular relation to one another. This account is appealing because it avoids the various difficulties with calling union a mode. As a superadded relation, union *just is* the fact that mind and body stand in this particular relation and so no further explanation is needed. This interpretation has the added virtue of highlighting the way union is unlike other attributes in how it requires two entities.

This account, though convenient, falls short in a few ways. First, describing union as a relation has no true explanatory power. It might accurately describe the state of mind and body insofar as they are in a kind of relation and insofar as they are united, but it does not give an account of the way in which they are united. To say that mind and body are united because they stand in a union relation to one another is a mere restatement of what Descartes finds obvious to the senses: that mind and body are united. Second, construing union this way is dangerously similar to Regius' claim that mind and body are in a particular relation to one another by mere position. Of course, Regius might have had a number of ideas in mind when he suggests unity by position;

perhaps mind and body are united just when they are really close together, or perhaps even co-extended with one another (as other commentators suggest). Descartes adamantly refuses Regius' proposal that mind and body are united by position, and so it seems that one who believes mind and body to be united by relation would have to explain how a union relation is different from an account where unity is achieved through position. Finally, and perhaps most compelling, is the fact that Descartes *says* that the union of mind and body is a mode. To say that it is a mode is to say that it is an attribute. If one takes Descartes' claims seriously, this explicit admission must be accounted for within his larger philosophy. Commentators who construe union as anything other than a mode are committed to denying the sincerity of this passage (and perhaps this entire letter to Regius). While many are comfortable doing so, we saw earlier that this is a convenient but indefensible position. Moreover, construing union as a relation does not get us further in our attempt to understand how Descartes can hold true union and real distinction. As a relation, there are no obvious implications for true union or real distinction. Union, then, should not be interpreted as a mere relation according to Descartes. Adhering to his explicit claim, I will later argue that Descartes' careful recognition of union as a mode holds the explanatory power that is absent if one considers union a relation.

Taking this idea that union is a mode seriously, the next set of objections arises from the attempt to square union with Descartes' metaphysics of substances. In order to show how union as a mode is consistent with Descartes' philosophy, I have to show (1) that it is in accord with his definition of attributes, (2) how union is intelligible as an

attribute of substance and to which substance union properly belongs, and (3) whether a mode can be shared by two substances.

The first concern is the easiest to overcome. Recall Descartes' distinction between a substance and its attributes. A substance is an entity that requires only divine concurrence for its existence. An attribute depends upon a substance for existence. That is, an attribute cannot be thought of without thinking of the substance in which in inheres. For example, one cannot conceive of the attribute shape without conceiving it as inhering in an extended substance. Union is in accord with this definition. It is not a substance itself, because it depends upon substance for its intelligibility. One cannot conceive of union without also thinking of the substances in which it inheres, that is, one cannot think of union without thinking of the substances that are united.

Once again, we run into the peculiar notion that union needs two substances for intelligibility. Although it is slightly odd, union still fits within Descartes' conception of attributes. While union must be a notion that includes the joining of two things, one can easily consider the attribute union as an attribute of mind or body. One can imagine extended substance without the union attribute, in which case it would exist independently of mind. One can also imagine body *with* the attribute union. In this case the body would be united to mind.[48] The need for another substance does not prevent one from clearly and distinctly imagining extended substance with a mode of union. The

48. Descartes makes some comments suggesting that the human mind must be joined to the human body (e.g., AT III 460; CSMK 200/ AT VII 78; CSM II 54.), but these passages are not directly relevant to the discussion at hand. It is important to note in passing, however, that Descartes does not allow for human minds and human bodies to be united to anything other than one another.

same would be true of mind: one can imagine mind with or without the attribute of union. Even though union reads like a two-place relation, it does not pose insurmountable difficulties when transposed upon Descartes' definition of attributes.

This raises the next concern: the question of to which substance union rightly belongs. I answer that union must inhere in both substances mind and body. The last section went a long way in supporting this claim. Again recall that an attribute must refer to its principal property. This means that an attribute must be intelligible in reference to its principal property. Color, for example, is known to belong to extended substance because it is only intelligible when it inheres in an extended substance. But we just noted that there is no problem conceiving of union in either mind or body. Our ability to conceive of union as an attribute of both mind and body suggests that it properly belongs to both substances. Because Descartes has set up his metaphysical framework wherein the intelligibility of an attribute means that the attribute properly belongs to the substance to which it refers, the fact that union is intelligible to both substances means that both mind and body can contain this mode. There is no basis for denying the possibility that either substance be united through a mode of union.

The final and most critical concern springs from the claim that when united in the human being, mind and body both contain the same mode. We saw that the real distinction of mind and body is based on one's ability to separate out all the attributes of one from all the attributes of another. One can make these distinctions because attributes are only intelligible to their respective principal properties. I have already argued that it is in accord with Descartes' intelligibility criteria that mind and body share the same

mode, but it is also useful to note that there is precedent for two different substances sharing modes. For example, Descartes mentions that all substances share a number of other peculiar attributes: "The most general items which we regard as things are *substance, duration, order, number* and any other items of this kind which extend to all classes of things."[49] Here Descartes is attempting to delineate various objects of perception, and in doing so, he admits that there are items that extend to all classes of things. However, he goes on to specify that duration, order, and number are "affections of things" or modes:

> We shall also have a very distinct understanding of *duration*, *order* and *number*, provided we do not tack onto them any concept of substance. Instead, we should regard the duration of a thing simply as a mode under which we conceive the thing in so far as it continues to exist. And similarly we should not regard order or number as anything separate from the things in which are ordered or numbered, but should think of them simply as modes under which we consider the things in question.[50]

Akin to what the Medievalists called 'transcendental' properties, Descartes notices that there are modes that extend to all things and are thus shared by all substances. Because his philosophy allows for these transcendental properties, my suggestion that union is an attribute of both mind and body is not so far afield after all. Of course, the parallel is not perfect, and I do not mean to suggest that union is a transcendental property that extends to all substances. I point out Descartes' admission of transcendental properties merely to show that—contrary to those who think that two substances cannot share a mode—Descartes acknowledges certain modes that all substances have. At the very least, this

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49. AT VIIIA 22; CSM I 208.

50. AT VIIIA 26; CSM I 211.

precedent grounds my claim that union is a mode of both mind and body, especially when paired with the realization that union is in accord with Descartes' intelligibility criteria.

Even though Descartes' mention of transcendental properties lessens the absurdity of my claim, there is still one more devastating problem to address: is real distinction threatened by the suggestion that mind and body are united through a mode? If Descartes' suggestion to Regius means that mind has a mode of union and that body has a mode of union, it does not seem possible that mind and body can be separated from one another. One would not be able to separate out all the attributes of one from the attributes of the other, and so one could not know that mind and body are really distinct. Indeed under Descartes' framework mind and body would not be really distinct.

I take up this problem in the next chapter. I will argue that because union is a *mode*, it preserves real distinction in one sense but not in another. The seemingly devastating problem that mind and body are not separable when united by a mode can thus be explained as precisely the kind of union that Descartes needs in order for his belief in the human being as an *ens per se* to hold.

CHAPTER IV

RECONCILIATION

The goal of this thesis is to explain how Descartes can possibly hold real distinction of mind and body and true union without contradiction. By detailing his metaphysics of substances and taking seriously his claim that the union of mind and body is achieved through a mode, we now have all the pieces to explain away this apparent inconsistency. In order to show how Descartes can hold both claims I will first show how real distinction is not threatened by union, and then I will show how true union can be achieved and maintained despite real distinction. Throughout, Descartes' understanding of union as a mode will play a central role.

Real Distinction amidst Union

The ability to uphold real distinction amidst union hinges upon the ability to construe union as a mode in addition to noticing two different definitions of 'real distinction' within Descartes' writings. Union understood as a mode means that this attribute is not an essential property of mind or body, and so they are able to be really distinct in the sense that they can exist apart from one another.

We just saw that, despite initial appearances, union construed as a mode is consistent with Descartes' philosophy. Admittedly union is a mode that is unlike many others since it needs another substance to be intelligible, but this oddity does not render

union an incoherent attribute. It is still consistent with the definition for attributes that Descartes puts forth in the *Principles.* Furthermore, lest commentators still take issue with problems of mind and body's ability to contain the same mode, Descartes' admission of transcendental attributes sets the precedent for this possibility. These are properties that are contained within every substance, since they pertain to existence. Without attributes like duration, order, and number, a thing cannot be understood to exist. While this does not conclusively show that *union* is a mode, it does aid the argument insofar as it hints that the possibility of an attribute referring to more than one substance is not quite so far afield from Descartes' philosophy as one might think. The conclusive evidence for union as an attribute of both substances rests upon Descartes' proposed method for discerning the distinction between substances. When one encounters an attribute, one knows it belongs to a particular substance based in its ability to refer to that substance's principal property. Because there are no obvious problems conceiving of union as a mode of either body or mind, it must properly belong to both of them. At least, given Descartes' criteria, there is no reason to deny that union properly refers to one and not the other. Finally, some might argue that union is not a property at all. This stance is dissatisfying because in order to hold this interpretation, one must deny Descartes' explicit imperative to Regius that union is achieved through a mode.

In Chapter Two, we saw that a modal attribute is one that is characterized by its accidental nature. This is the crucial notion that allows the real distinction of mind and body. Because union is an accidental attribute, mind and body can exist apart from one another. Union is not an essential feature of either substance, and so one can still have a

clear and distinct idea of mind and body independently from one another. This ability to clearly and distinctly understand mind and body allows for the possibility that mind and body can exist apart.

Real distinction understood in terms of one substance's ability to exist apart from another appears in Descartes' thought as early as the *Meditations.* This claim is crucial for his philosophy because it sets up implications for his theological and epistemological concerns. Earlier I also noted that scholars often puzzle over why in the *Meditations* Descartes makes the weaker claim that mind and body *can* possibly exist apart, rather than the stronger claim that they *actually* exist apart. Given my interpretation of the mind-body union, we are now in a position to say why he makes only this weak claim. Descartes believes that union of mind and body is apparent through the senses. One does not perceive real distinction of mind and body clearly and distinctly, but one can have an idea of it. We also saw earlier that having an idea of real distinction ensures the possibility of a substance even though we might not yet know with certainty that it exists. This is the type of claim in which Descartes is interested for his theological argument for the immortality of the soul. He does not need to say that mind and body are in fact really distinct; he only needs to show that it is possible for them to be so. When mind and body are united merely through a mode, one can clearly and distinctly have an idea of them existing apart from one another, since removing the accidental attribute does not change the essence of mind or body.

At this point it is important to notice that there are two different definitions of real distinction up and running. At times Descartes uses real distinction to express mind

and body's ability to exist apart from one another. At other times he uses the term to denote that one can separate out all attributes of one substance from the attributes of another. It is tempting to conflate these two definitions because of their intricate connection. They should not be conflated, however, because while one's ability to separate the attributes of one substance from another ensures the possibility of their real distinction, the converse is not the case. One substance's ability to exist apart from another does not entail that they share no attributes—provided, of course, that the shared attribute is accidental. The obvious examples of this (color, shape, even imagination) show how an attribute refers to its principal property alone. Again, Descartes' pedagogical emphasis does not preclude the possibility that an attribute can intelligibly refer to more than one substance.

Once one notices that the two definitions for real distinction are not equivalent, the added notion that union is a mode explains how Descartes can hold real distinction even when mind and body are united. Because mind-body union is achieved through an accidental property, mind and body can enjoy real distinction—in the sense that they are able to exist apart from one another—without contradiction.

Mind and body are not, however, distinct in the sense that they are completely separable from one another. Once mind and body share a mode, the attributes of one cannot all be separated out from the attributes of the other. Because this is the criterion for knowing that one substance is different from another, real distinction in this sense fails.

While Descartes can uphold real distinction amidst union in one sense, he cannot uphold the other. The ease with which these two definitions of real distinction are conflated plays a large role in the initial tension between true union and real distinction. Even though my proposal suggests one way in which real distinction is maintained amidst true union, it fails with the alternate definition.

We are now in a position to solve our two final problems. First, if two substances share a mode, it seems that real distinction collapses in the sense that mind and body cannot be separated from one another. That is, one can no longer separate out all the attributes of one from all the attributes of the other. Second, how can there be true union amidst real distinction? If mind and body are united through an accidental property, the kind of union achieved is not the type of union that Descartes strives for. He explicitly avoids accidental union in favor of true or substantial union. To show how real distinction and true union can be held without contradiction, let us now turn to these final problems.

True Union amidst Real Distinction

In order to show how real distinction and true union can be held with consistency, there are two main problems that emerge from my interpretation of Descartes. Threatening real distinction, there is the problem that when two substances share a mode, they are no longer really distinct. In the sense that one can no longer separate out one substance from another, real distinction simply cannot be achieved

under this model. In the previous section I argued that there are two definitions of real distinction, and that the iteration that is most important for Descartes' theology and epistemology is maintained despite this modal union. When union is based on an accidental property, mind and body can be thought of clearly and distinctly, and so with the goodness and power of God their ability to exist apart is secure. Even so, an adequate solution must address the definition of real distinction that Descartes does not achieve. While the conflation of these two definitions causes most of the tension between the desire to hold real distinction and true union, it is within his quest for the human being's nature that he locates the resolution of the issue. Indeed recognizing the failure of real distinction because of the modal union is essential for understanding how he can explain true union.

The second major problem is that when union is understood as a mode, it results in an accidental union. Descartes adamantly refuses this possibility. He wants the human being to be an *ens per se*, an entity in self, one thing—not two. If union is accidental, Descartes' human being is not a true unity but a mere heap or aggregate. Hoffman notices that Descartes could avoid this problem by proposing that the human being is an *ens per se* when union is essential to at least one of its component substances.[51] Hoffman subsequently rejects this picture, and he is right to do so since it is not intelligible to ascribe an essential attribute of union to either mind or body. Furthermore, this suggestion would also deny the possibility of real distinction by either definition. Seeking a notion of unity that is more robust, Hoffman argues for a trialist interpretation.

51. Hoffman, "Unity of Descartes's Man," 365.

No doubt he was right to reject the idea of an essential union attribute, but, I argue, this does not require that we adopt a trialist reading. Regarding the true union of the human being, then, the problem requiring explanation is just how this accidental mode of union results in a substantial unity.

As I have previously noted, unity by position, disposition, or mode is ruled out by Descartes' comment to Regius that mind and body "are united not by position or disposition, […] but by a true mode of union,"[52] because he does not want the unity of the human being to be merely accidental. If we are to believe that Descartes' issue with unity in this passage is because of the accidental nature of positional or dispositional union, why would he posit another explanation for unity that is also considered accidental? It would appear as though Descartes would be chastising Regius for suggesting that mind and body are united accidentally, only to suggest—in the very same sentence—a different accidental way that mind and body are united.

Instead, his response suggests that there is a meaningful difference between positional or dispositional unity and the unity achieved by a mode. I have argued that construing union as a mode of substance is a better alternative than unity by position or disposition because—when paired with his substance and attribute framework—it results not in a mere accidental union, but in a true or substantial one. Furthermore, I have argued that scholars are mistaken to believe that a union based on an accidental property necessarily results in an accidental union. Within Descartes' framework, it does the opposite.

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52. ATVIII 493; CSMK 206.

Recall that in the last section we saw that when mind and body are united through a mode of union, they are no longer separable. This is because in order for one to know that they are really distinct, one must be able to separate out all the attributes of one from all the attributes of the other. By positing a shared attribute, it is no longer possible to separate out all attributes. Mind and body both contain union, and so when joined in this way the union attribute of mind is not distinct from the union attribute of body. The result is a confused perception of mind and body when they are united. Descartes explicitly admits this when he acknowledges that when mind and body are united, one cannot have a clear and distinct perception of mind and body:

> finally what belongs to the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses. That is why people who never philosophize and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. They regard both of them as a single thing, that is to say, they conceive of their union; because to conceive of the union between two things is to conceive them as one single thing.[53]

The union of mind and body is not known clearly and distinctly, but only obscurely. It is known obscurely precisely because one cannot separate all attributes of mind from attributes of body. The unity of mind and body, then, is evident to the senses. This sensory explanation gives further credence to the claim that the human being is really one thing.

When we remember that a substance is defined by its attributes and can only be understood as distinct from another substance when all of its attributes are separable, it is clear that the union of mind and body results in one thing, not two. In this context,

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53. AT III 692; CSMK 227.

Descartes can justifiably claim that the true union of mind and body result in an *ens per se*.

Commentators who believe that a modal union results in an accidental union thus err when they fail to see the implications of this view in light of his unique substance metaphysics. Again paying close attention to subjects of predication, it is the case that union is an accidental mode of the substances mind and body, but this does not mean that basing union on these accidental properties results in an accidental union. Given the nuances of Descartes' metaphysics, union through a mode has substantive repercussions that are not present in, say, union by position or disposition. So while union is accidental to the subjects mind and body, it is not accidental but rather essential to the human being. This picture is in accord with Descartes' framework as well since the human being would not exist without this union.

Earlier I mentioned that scholars wonder about the weak claim that mind and body can exist apart, rather than the claim that they actually exist apart. Again, my proposal offers a solution. Because mind and body are truly united, they do not exist apart when joined to unite the human being. Similarly, his note on how we perceive the union of the human being suggests that we perceive it as one entity because *it is* one entity. Suddenly the weak claim that Descartes makes in the *Meditations* can be read as a calculated one that is consistent with the nuances of the way in which mind and body are united.

Finally, referring back to the two main problems addressed in this section, when true union is achieved, it still does not threaten real distinction. Of course, Descartes can

achieve only real distinction in the sense that mind and body can exist apart, but this should be satisfying since it is the type needed to uphold his theological and epistemological concerns. Additionally, the way in which union as a mode prevents the complete separability of mind and body is exactly the kind of union Descartes espouses for the human being. When union is a mode, Descartes can say that mind and body are really distinct and he can also say that they are substantially united in the human being.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The merits of my proposal hearken back to the problems set out in the first chapter. This interpretation is promising because it takes seriously the various—even apparently contradictory—claims that Descartes makes about the human being. Instead of retreating to a position that denies one or both claims in order to ease the tension, my proposal seeks to explain how these competing claims stand under Descartes' philosophy.

It is not easy to reconcile these views, and commentators including Paul Hoffman offer a variety of promising proposals. Ultimately, though, the suggestion that mind-body union should be understood within a hylomorphic framework is dissatisfying because Descartes never explicitly explains union this way, although he had a variety of opportunities to do so. In addition to the knowledge that Descartes frequently distanced his ideas from the Aristotelian tradition, explaining union through hylomorphism can easily take readers uncomfortably outside the bounds of traditional Cartesian interpretations.

Similarly, there is much debate surrounding the extent to which Descartes meant to propose a trialist view, where the human being is a third type of substance. The most promising aspect of this suggestion is that it highlights the pervasive ambiguity that runs through Descartes' discussion of the human being. He refers to it as an 'entity' and as a 'complete thing.' Since Descartes uses the terms 'substance' and 'thing' interchangeably

at times, scholars who posit trialism have good reason to do so. While he never explicitly refers to the human being as a third substance, many commentators wonder if Descartes is nonetheless committed to such a view. Still, like a hylomorphic interpretation, commentators are justified in their hesitation to adopt trialism. Even with rampant ambiguity, Descartes' dualism remains the commonly held interpretation.

My suggestion that the mind-body union is best understood through Descartes' letter to Regius in 1642 obviates the need to take a definitive stance on either of these controversial views. I argued that a modal union is consistent with Descartes' philosophy when one delves into his detailed conception of substances. Even while union as a mode is not obviously consistent with his larger philosophy upon a cursory read, interpreting union this way reveals a depth and sophistication to Descartes' metaphysics that results in a more cohesive picture than hylomorphism or trialism can produce.

There are, however, new lines of inquiry that emerge from my proposal. First it will be important to take a closer look into the various types of attributes in Cartesian metaphysics. Union is a peculiar attribute in that it reads more like a two-place relation than an attribute like color or shape. It would be useful to investigate if there are other attributes that function this same way, or if union is singularly peculiar.

Also regarding attributes, my proposal raises the genuine concern that Descartes' admission of transcendental properties might collapse his entire metaphysical framework. If indeed his epistemology is based upon his ability have an idea of mind really distinct from body, it seems that it would never be possible to separate mind and body because of attributes like duration, order, and number. Since these attributes pertain

to all substances, it is not possible to separate *all* attributes of one from attributes of another. It is possible that Descartes' epistemology is doomed by this catch. He does not appear overly concerned, however, with this problem, and so it bears further investigation. It is possible that he did not notice this problem, but it is also possible that he did not dedicate time to it because of the way it is resolved by other aspects of his philosophy.

Finally, despite my belief that this reading is promising because it circumvents the need to take a stance on trialism, I can also imagine ways in which this reading supports a trialist view. One of the greatest obstacles to trialism is that each substance must have one principal property that constitutes its nature and essence. Hoffman argues that a substance can have more than one principal property, but with my reading he need not go so far. It is possible to consider union the principal property of the human being. It would be in accord with Descartes' requirement that the principal property constitute the nature and essence of a substance—for without it, the human being would cease to exist. It would also alleviate Hoffman's need to argue for both thinking and extension as principal properties of the human being since union would subsume both beneath it. Much more work would have to be done to discern this potential. If it were the case that union provided Hoffman and others with the principal property they need for a trialist reading, my proposal would, I think, grant support to a trialist view since it would not seem so incongruent with Descartes' metaphysics after all. Insofar as my interpretation is based on the details of Descartes' metaphysics, it can be argued that a trialist reading that makes use of union as a mode of mind and body and yet the principal property of

the human being is not so inconsistent after all. Again, I do not mean to support a trialist view, and I do believe that my proposal circumvents the need to take a definitive stance. I merely offer this suggestion as one possible implication of construing union as a mode.

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